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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature in self-disclosure and gender differences and offers some validity comments regarding the operationalization of the intimacy concept. Self-disclosure research offers two conclusions in regards to gender differences in communication. First, there is no definite indication that females self-disclose more than males. Contradictory findings are the rule through the review of the literature. Second, females do disclose more on the intimate level than males. Males tend to focus their disclosures around activities; while females disclose more on the emotional content level. Intimacy, in the past, has been treated as a static variable, and the paper offers the conclusion that a transactional approach may be useful tool in discussing gender differences and self-disclosure. As support for this contention, excerpts from student papers assigned in a basic communication course, honors division, are offered. These excerpts offer the student perspective as it applies to the validity issues. Contains 25 references. (RS)

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Gender Differences in Relationship Development and Self-Disclosure

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Abstract

Self-disclosure research offers two startling conclusions in regards to gender differences in communication. First, there is no definite indication that females self-disclose more than males. Contradictory findings are the rule through the review of the literature. Second, females do disclose more on the intimate level than males. Males tend to focus their disclosures around activities; while females disclose more on the emotional content level.

This paper reviews the literature on self-disclosure and gender differences and offers some validity comments regarding the operationalization of the intimacy concept. Intimacy, in the past, has been treated as a static variable, and this paper offers the conclusion that a transactional approach may be a useful tool in discussing gender differences and self-disclosure. As support for this contention, excerpts from student papers assigned in a Basic Communication Course, Honors Division, are offered. These excerpts offer the student perspective as it applies to the validity issues.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-DISCLOSURE

Socialization is an instinctual behavior not unique to the human species. Endless examples of such behavior exist throughout the phylogenetic domain. The ability to discuss this process, and to manage a multitude of variations within relationships, is a uniquely human quality. Within the human species, however, the quantity and quality of relationships varies dramatically. This perceptual differentiation permeates through cultural delineations and continues through the various sub-cultural divisions. This paper will focus on one such division, gender, and will explore the implications of gender differences in relation to instruction of relationship development and maintenance. A second focus of this paper will be to discuss various issues of validity and reliability as they apply to the research in the area of self-disclosure and gender differences.

The importance of socialization as a integral component of human existence cannot be denied. Unlimited quotations could be offered here to support this statement. Steve Duck (1985) expresses himself most forcefully when he states, "our moments of greatest joy and sorrow are founded in relationships" (p. 655). In this light, a basic communication course purporting to deal with

interpersonal communication should cover the concepts of relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution. Relationship instruction encompasses a variety of contexts, including, but not limited to: family, friendships, romantic attachments, and work contacts. Using the term social support, Sarason, Levin, Basham and Sarason (1983) conclude:

> People high in the number of social supports report not only the occurrence of more positive events than do people who are low in number of social supports, but they also report that the positive events are more expectable and exert a greater impact on their lives. In addition, they believe they have more control over the positive events. (p. 135)

Developing this network of social support requires a degree of dedication and commitment. "Friendship involves the partner's mutual willingness to commit free or otherwise uncommitted time to one another, as well as their positive reactions to one another as unique and important individuals" (Wright, 1982, p. 5). Thus, the extent of one's support system is determined by a number of factors including availability, proximity, and willingness to commit. These factors are also influenced by the individual's desire for personal contacts with others, often based on the knowledge that "the attainment of intimate friendship has positive consequences, and its absence has negative effects" (Reis, Senchak, Solomon, 1985, p. 1204).

Intimacy, as associated with relationship development and

maintenance, is a cause for consternation when appraising gender issues. Sarason, Levin, Basham and Sarason (1983) conclude that women tend to develop a larger support system than men. Cozby's (1973) review of the literature on self-disclosure draws the inevitable conclusion that women are more likely to self-disclose than men, particularly on the more intimate level. This conclusion is accurate twenty years later, but more recent literature has attempted to discern exactly what is "intimate" self-disclosure and if this label is appropriate to gender considerations.

The interpretation of the word "relationships" is the starting point for understanding gender differences. Men and women tend to hold disparate views on relationship development and importance. An analogy offered by Wright (1982) offers an appropriate view: males tend toward side-by-side relationships and females gravitate toward face-to-face connections. "In general, males are more oriented towards engaging in joint activities, whereas females are more oriented towards sharing emotional activities (Hendrick, 1988).

Derlega (1984) details the risks that one may accrue through self-disclosure. These include: the rejection of the self-concept, finding out that the other is not interested in having an intimate relationship, information can be used by the other to gain power or control, betrayal of the information to another, breaking relationship boundaries, and a resulting inequity in the relationship based on nonequivalent input. Derlega concludes that these risks may, in part, explain the decreased level of intimacy

in self-disclosure by males. This applies directly to the face-to-face versus side-by-side analogy offered by Wright (1982).

Wright (1982) asked men and women to compare the relationships as developed within their own gender to the other gender's relationships. The title of the article, "Men's friendships, women's friendships and the alleged inferiority of the latter," established the conceptual frame for the research. Historically, the impression was "based on women's assumed superficiality and unpredictability, and sometimes upon their assumed competitiveness for available males" (p. 2). In this study. Wright found women rated their own relationships as "much better," as compared to relationships between men, due to the emotional involvement present within the relationships. In contrast, men's relationships revolved around activities, such as work, or sports, in short, "depersonalized activities." His overall conclusions question the strength of the difference findings when long term relationships are involved. Few, if any, of the studies presented in this present article have involved the investigation of long term relationships. Finally, the purpose of the relationship and definition of friendship/communication elements must also be called into task. "This contention [that women's friendships are inferior to those of men] would hold only to the degree that one assumed instrumentality, activity-centeredness, and a task orientation to be better than interpersonal sensitivity, personalism, and a socioemotional orientation" (p. 19).

Reis, Senchak and Solomon (1985) conclude that men's

interactions with other men were in most cases less intimate, intimacy again defined in terms of personal revealment, and meaningfulness. The general conclusion inferred that personal levels of communication are more prominent in relationships between women than in relationships between men. When the relationship exists between a man and a women, however, variations of the rules are inclined to be developed. Men will tend to place a high value on communication with a female, particularly when this involves a romantic, or potentially romantic, partner.

Rubin, Hill, Peplau and Dunkel-Schetter (1980) focus on this issue of male disclosure to women in light of changes in societal views of masculinity and femininity. "The modern male role encourages emotional intimacy, as long as it is confined to a close heterosexual relationship. As a result, the modern male is likely to rely on a romantic partner as a confidante and as a source of emotional support" (p. 306). The expectations that are derived from the societal norms may influence therefore the perceptual processes involved in relationship development. Furthermore, Reis, Senchak and Solomon (1985) noted that "men and women in egalitarian couples tended to disclose themselves more fully than did men and women in moderate or traditional couples" (p. 311). As societal role changes continue to develop, alterations in the expectancies of the participants may also occur.

Rubin, Hill, Peplau and Dunkel-Schetter (1980) also present findings that offer insight into the discussion of gender differences as they relate to the validity of research findings.

Males and females were asked to evaluate their conversational input in terms of intimacy of self-disclosure. "When the total report of self-disclosure was compared, no overall difference was found. Notable sex differences were found in particular topic area, but these differences ran in both directions" (p. 314). Rubin et. al. speculate that this is because the areas of female self-disclosure "generally seem to be more intimate" (p. 314) than the areas of self-disclosure expressed by males. The validity of one set of criteria for defining intimacy should be questioned in this light. It may be more fruitful to investigate intimacy on a transactional level, a level defined by the expectations of the relationship partners, as opposed to a standard of societal norms and research expectations that do not allow for these gender differences.

Based on societal expectations and norms, a primary area of concern is therefore the quality and quantity of self-disclosure inherent within a relationship. Self-disclosure, in general, refers to information concerning the self, whether it be feelings, attitudes, or information concerning past or future plans or events. Specifically studies of self-disclosure characteristically track the progression of the disclosure from a superficial to an intimate level, paralleling a proclivity for reciprocity.

Self-disclosure is central to the enhancement of relationship development. Following the Altman and Taylor (1973) Social Penetration Theory,

> ...relationships are predicted to move from superficial to more intimate areas of interpersonal exchange as

> individuals get to know one another. Individuals are expected to react positively to other's self-disclosure; and, in turn, people are willing to disclose personal information about themselves. (p. 173).

Walker and Wright (1976) examined the path of friendship development and the connection of this path to gender and self-disclosure. Both male and female pairs claimed an increased likelihood of further acquaintance in the presence of more intimate levels of self-disclosure. However, their study was hindered by a lack of male willingness to self-disclose on this more intimate level. The researchers had to recruit an additional fifty percent for the male population in order to obtain the necessary number to complete the experiment. "In other words, men who disclosed intimate things about themselves became better friends if they ever overcame their reluctance to engage in intimate self-disclosure. None of the women in the experiment showed a similar reluctance.." (p. 741).

Females do seem predisposed to engaged in more self-disclosure than males (see, for example, Jourard and Landsman, 1960; Jourard and Lasakow, 1958; and Jourard and Richman, 1963 for seminole articles on the subject). Continuing the trend throughout the development of the relationship, studies have also determined that females actually disclose more than males on intimate topics (Winstead, 1986), but that the difference is not present pertaining to nonintimate topics (Lombardo and Berzonsky, 1979; Lombardo and Lavine, 1981; Morgan, 1976; and Morton, 1978). Continuing the line

of intimacy research, Derlega, Winstead, Wong and Greenspan (1987) found that individuals are more willing to engage in intimate levels of self-disclosure with a friend as compared to a stranger, and, consistent with previous findings, that women provided more intimate disclosures than men. Again, one should examine the operational definition of intimacy before making definite conclusions about this area. Subjects in this project were asked to write highly intimate notes to friends. Intimacy was operationalized in terms of a previous scoring of intimacy, which again presents intimacy as a one-dimensional concept, not as a transactional conduit within an individualized relationship.

These findings must be examined in line with the previously cited research on perceptions of relationships. Since men seem inclined to have relationships revolve around activities, while women favor a more emotional framework for their affiliations, it would seem, on an intuitive level, a logical development to find these differences in self-disclosure. Women to women conversations tend to stress emotional concepts such as sharing and trust more so than male to male interactions, where shared activities, rather than emotional content, are the focal points of the male interaction (Caldwell and Peplau, 1982; Crawford, 1977; Weiss and Lowenthal, 1975). The tendency for females to simply get together for conversation led a previous female student of mine to ask, "Would two men sit at the kitchen table and drink coffee for three hours? Women can!"

Continuing in this line of research and selectivity of

disclosure topics, Snell, Belk, Flowers, and Warren (1988) found men are willing to discuss issues that directly related to their masculinity, however, they are more reluctant than women to consider aspects of their interpersonal behaviors with both male and female conversational partners. Wright (1982) clearly summarizes this issue when he states that a woman is "more likely to emphasize personalism, self-disclosure, and supportiveness in her friendships. A man is somewhat more likely to emphasize external interest and mutually involving activities" (p. 19).

Accordingly, the role of self-disclosure in relationship development should be explored with the concept of sex-role characteristics. In 1973, Cozby indicated this problem:

> The fact that no study has reported greater male disclosure may be indicative of actual sex differences. The nature of any sex differences might be found if researchers were to pay greater attention to the types of items which reliably discriminate between males and females, and types of situations in which males and females would or would not differ in disclosure output (p. 76).

This statement should be a key area of focus in understanding and presenting the concept of self-disclosure to students in Basic Communication Courses, or any course, for that matter. Research in the past has tended to treat the intimacy of self-disclosure as a fixed variable, one not dependent on other situational factors. Further explanation may come from DeForest and Stone (1980), who

state "females may consistently disclose more intimate information than males....but be inconsistent in their self-disclosure performance assessed by other measures" (p. 95). For the alternate measure, he chose a previously developed intimacy scale, which required subjects to label statements as low, medium or high intimacy, and to select ten items they would exchange with a counselor. However, this method continued the treatment of intimacy in self-disclosure as an identifiable construct outside of the communication situation. What may be intimate in one relationship may not be defined as intimate in another; what may be labeled intimate by one participant may not be labeled intimate by a second participant. What a female may define as intimate may then be conditional on experience in previous relationships; the corresponding condition must also be implemented with regards to male interpretation of intimacy.

If, in fact, relationships between females attend to more emotional matters while relationships between males center around activities, the operational definition of the level of intimacy would be assumed to also differ between the genders. This difference would be not only in the perception of the disclosure, as when asked to identify on a paper and pencil test, but also in the actual disclosure itself. Females may then identify statements as intimate and nonintimate, but the identification of these statements may differ significantly between the genders.

In order to present this portrait of differing views of self-disclosure within relationships, eleven students participated in a

pilot project in a Basic Communication Course, Honors division. The course focused heavily on relationship development and maintenance. The students were acquainted with the concepts of gender differences, and You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation by Deborah Tanner was used as a catalyst for group discussion.

The major assignment in the course was to compare the relationships as presented in two popular movies: City Slickers and Fried Green Tomatoes. The following excerpts from two student papers (first female; second male) highlight the differences they perceived, and the gender differences of the writers:

> When Bonnie asks why men always talk about baseball, and she tells Ed that women talk about feelings and personal interactions, Ed responds, "If that were as interesting as baseball, they'd have cards for it and sell it with gum." Phil, however, provides a little insight as to why men choose this subject. A lot of time it's not because they are avoiding communication, but because this subject is the only way they can communicate. Activities sometimes become the connector when nothing else can....Talking for women...is a means of interaction. [female student]

> Listening is a process that sometimes required empathy....Because of this, women are generally considered better listeners than men, it's tough for a

> man to acknowledge that he understands another person's feelings when a lot of the time he doesn't even care."[1] [male student]

Further interpretation of these perceptions came from another male who wrote, "Baseball and sex, to point out a limited number of examples, are commonly subjected to a competitive style of conversation. This style however, doesn't prevent the men from having a meaningful conversation, it just changes how it is approached and handled." His paper continues in this same revealing style when he discusses the process of empathy,

> When Phil, who has contained his emotions, explodes at the cattle drivers, Mich and Ed are ready to comfort their friend, but this comfort has rules other than those of women. Instead of direct empathy, the men will often engage in a light humor, or even joking in order to relieve the immediate pressure of the situation....Mitch says to Curly, 'I'm joking, I do it with everybody. It's just my way.' This defines how he views communication, he uses humor to convey and to lead to intimacy. This is similar to how the characters in Fried Green Tomatoes use parables to communicate closeness. The stories serve much the same purpose as the jokes Mitch uses to relieve

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[1]Personal knowledge of these two students offers insights into their interpretations. The female (first writer) was a very determined individual, yet she was very empathic with the other students. The other students indicated throughout the semester their desire to work with her. The male student presented the stereotypic picture of a male college student, regaling the class with his party exploits daily.

the tension of a situation and to guide to intimacy. [male student]

Another student traced this pattern of intimacy to early development. He again stressed the competitive nature of male communication as compared to interaction between females. He writes:

> Girls grow up in an environment which develops intimacy, and this is shown through their games and their conversation. Girls play games in which everybody belongs and where there are no winners nor losers, and similarly, in their speech they include the group by using phrases such as 'Let's go' and 'Let's ask.' [male student]

To contrast the male style with the females, this student proceeds to discuss the relationship between the three friends in City Slickers:

> At the beginning of the movie, Mitch is suffering from low self-concept because things are not good at his job. Two of his friends, Ed and Phil, decide to take him on a cattle drive to help sort out his problems. This very act itself is different from how women react to problems. Instead of talking to Mitch about his problems, Ed and Phil decide to take Mitch on a trip....Boy's friendships are activity oriented, and as they grow older, their relationships remain based on activities. Therefore, when Mitch has a problem, they decide to go on an

activity together because that is when they feel most comfortable. [male student]

A female student, however, felt there was definitely an emotional undertone to these male conversations. The physical context of the communication provides the emotional outlets:

> Yet, despite their portrayed stereotype of male relationships, these characters are able to bond and risk rejection. The game, 'best day and worst day of my life' is an example of this. Within the context of this game, each character reveals a side of them we would not otherwise have seen. Ed discloses his father's infidelities and the pain of losing his father....Although this was very difficult for him, he trusted his friends, this was a high risk situation. [female student]

A statement from a female paper summarizes the class perceptions of the relationships as portrayed:

> In comparison to each other, the characters in City Slickers are as concerned about each other as the characters from Fried Green Tomatoes. They offer different styles in expression. Both films indicate that this bonding between the main characters is reciprocal. They are willing to trust and risk rejection in self disclosure for the purpose of bonding. [female student]

These papers offer an excellent insight into the transactional process of self-disclosure, an insight that few of the cited

research articles included. Preliminary insights from these students formed the conceptualization of this paper; however, all instructor comments regarding the exploration into published research were avoided until after the papers were submitted.

Yoder, Hugenberg and Wallace (1993) clarify many of these concerns with regard to self-disclosure when they discuss three approaches to communication competence. The action approach focuses upon the one individual (speaker and the message). The receivers are the focal point of the reaction approach. Finally, the transactional approach stresses the notion of cooperation to create a sharing environment. A reexamination of the literature on intimacy levels of self-disclosure reveals a definite bias towards the action/reaction approach. The transactional nature, the sharing, the cooperation between participants is rarely discussed. Hill and Stull (1987) comment upon the inconsistent findings in the area of self-disclosure. They conclude that three elements interact to result in these inconsistencies. First, self-disclosure is a complex system of factors, not a uni-dimensional construct. Second, the methodology relegates self-disclosure to a single dimension. These combine to form the third criticism, and this is of the conceptualization itself, the notion that self-disclosure can be measured separate from the relationship.

This validity/conceptualization issue should be addressed in future research on self-disclosure and interpersonal perception. If both participants perceive that the relationship exists on an intimate level, then regardless of the types of self-disclosure

present, there exists a level of intimacy. Therefore, males may not have to discuss their greatest fears, their global masculinity/femininity, or other communication identified as highly emotional, in order to share an intimate relationship with another. The level of intimacy is defined in terms of the shared perception between the participants, and most likely, this is based on a shared expectation, and fulfillment of this expectation, regarding the quantity and classification of the self-disclosure.

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